Reflections on the development of a model of partnership designed to enhance the 'digital curriculum' within a sociology programme

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Summary
As this journal demonstrates, there are a growing number of accounts describing how student partnerships can be achieved in practice. However - and as some of this literature highlights - student partnerships are not merely technical impositions that can be simply implemented from 'there' to 'here' (Healey et al, 2016). They are instead reflexively experienced as processes of engagement by those who are working together within situated environments. Partnerships are not only directed by particular people toward particular ends, they are also relative to the contexts they variously exist within (see Elphick and Sims, 2017, for example).

Drawing on our experiences of working together on a project designed to enhance the 'digital curriculum' within an undergraduate sociology programme, this case-study reflects on a model of partnership that emerged from the situating determinants within which our relationship was based - and how these conditions subsequently impacted on assessments concerning the 'success' of the project. These determinants include the aims of the initiative that the project was a part, the substantive arena within which the project was focussed, and our own competencies, experiences, and networks. The role of the institution in enabling *and* constraining the project is also explored. In examining the values that underpinned the model of partnership that we developed, the paper follows Healey et al's (2014, p 7) contention that student partnerships are a process of engagement, not merely a product that can be measured by outcomes. More specifically, it highlights the importance of reflecting on the interdependencies that exist between people, process, and purpose when doing partnership work, and how these connections influence judgements about effectiveness.

Description of project
The proliferation of digital technology - not to mention the growing use of computers within school classrooms – has a strong impact on the expectations, experiences and needs of undergraduate students entering Higher Education (HE) (HoC, 2016; Latif, 2017). At the same time, the data produced by this increasingly digitised world are transforming the demands of the graduate employment market (Newman and Beetham, 2017). Whilst 'digital literacy' remains something of a contested concept, it is generally taken to refer to the ability to understand and use digitised information (Gilster, 1997). Early discussion tended to emphasise IT skills, but more recent work imagines digital literacy as a range of interconnected behaviours, practices, and identities. JISC (2014), for example, have recently provided a model that emphasises digital scholarship, information literacy, ICT literacy, media literacy, collaborations and communications, careers and identity management, and, learning skills.

At the same time there is a growing interest in curriculum mapping within HE level programmes (Arafeh, 2015). This has particularly been the case in areas of

information and digital literacy where delivery often occurs in synthesis between information management services and academic staff (ACEL, 2012). To this end, staff-student partnerships have been highlighted as being particularly effective in affecting change in arenas of both digital literacy and curriculum development (Killen and Chatterton, 2015), with Jones et al (2012, p 1) commenting 'students will only acquire digital maturity if we take the time to consider what they need from us'. Indeed, partnership, interaction, and collaboration are at the very heart of whole digital enterprise.

It is partly due to these concerns that we received institutional funding to explore and develop the 'digital curriculum' using a student-staff partnership approach. The funding allowed Clarissa to be paid for 45 hours, and approximately 15 days of Tom's time. Each project could also access an additional budget of £500. The programme of work implemented a four point research-led strategy that was designed to facilitate and assess programme-level change.

1. Map digital literacy within sociological studies programme/modules using the JISC model (2014)
2. Design and implement a 'self-efficacy' questionnaire based on the JISC model assessing perceived capacity amongst current students (n=112)
3. Conduct focus groups/interviews with key stakeholders to identify areas of enhancement
4. Develop a dissemination and 'marketing campaign' to promote awareness of digital literacy within sociological studies programmes

The purpose of this case-study is not to outline the results of the project. Instead, it is explore the nature of the partnership we developed in order to achieve these aims. Whilst the literature does attempt to describe some approaches to working in partnership with respect to the 'digital curriculum' (see Killen and Chatterton, 2015, for some examples), the portability of such work can be limited by the situational determinants that shape the process of partnership. This is, in part, why Healey et al (2014) propose a more general orientation to student-staff partnership working that is value-driven rather than necessarily prescriptive. Models of partnership need to be understood and reflected upon with some consideration of the conditions that give rise to them. Reflection on these determinants should enable better understanding of the nature and expectations of partnership working, and any associated impact that may or may not flow from it.

Enabling Partnership
To this end, the emergent model of partnership that we developed was influenced by a number of factors. These included: the values that underpinned the wider 'Inside Knowledge' initiative; the roles that could adopted by the key actors within the partnership; and, the networks of experience and influence those actors could affect. A visual representation of this model is presented in Figure 1. Each element will be discussed in turn.

Figure 1. Model of Partnership
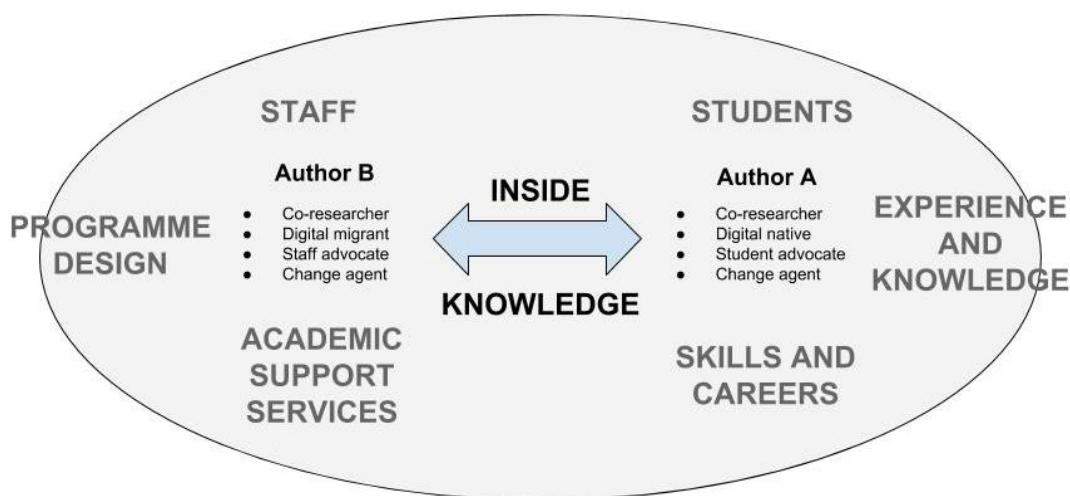
Our project was funded by the 'Inside Knowledge' initiative within The University of Sheffield (see McKay and Baily, 2017). The broad purpose of this scheme was to engage student expertise in order to improve pedagogical experiences at departmental and degree levels. It sought to bring academic staff and students together to work on an aspect of learning provision, and develop the various communities of learning that exist within departments. The scheme was intended to effect significant change and so supported three projects that would affect the experience of the majority of students in the cohort - one of which was the project outlined above. The scheme offered modest funding to support the aims of the proposal. This mainly consisted of staff 'buy out' and direct remuneration to the student. To this end, our partnership was underwritten by a (financially supported) commitment to positive change that would achieve maximal benefit for a cohort of students.

Beyond this driving purpose, our partnership was also shaped by the relative knowledge, experiences and positions that we have as individuals. Whilst, the idea of a divide between 'digital migrants and 'digital natives' is overdrawn (Bennet et al, 2008) - there is diversity both within and between each group - the distinction does help to emphasise that there are key differences between staff and students with respect to the digital curriculum and why we might want to work together to develop it. As 'digital migrants', many educators feel like they are running just to stand still within respect to digital innovation. On the other hand, students - many of whom will be 'digital natives' - require staff to develop the courses that have the capacity to respond to their changing technological experiences and needs. It is for this reason that staff-student partnerships are important in enabling a cohesive learning and teaching experience within which the experiences of both parties are recognised. So, whilst Clarissa could draw upon her own experiences and needs as a current student, as well as those of her wider cohort, Tom could use his own experience as a programme designer/manager, and his wider networks in academic support services, to help support those experiences and enable those needs. Similarly, neither of us has programming skills, but we are both variously experienced in relation to particular aspects of social and digital media. Clarissa in the way that she

uses digital technology in everyday and educational life, and Tom in respect to designing and operating enhanced virtual learning environments. In many ways, we are differently enabled in terms of our experience and expertise.

There were other determining features of the partnership too. As funded positions, only one student and one member of staff could be formally attached to each project. This meant that we also needed to act as advocates for the development of a digital curriculum *and* partnership working more generally. Only by working within our respective communities could we hope to secure the maximal benefit from the project - programme level change that would be informed by evidence. Indeed, the project was necessarily conceived and framed as a collaborative research project as that would have particular currency within a 'research-intensive' university.

Evidence of effectiveness and impacts
Given the collaborative nature of inquiry, we consider the model of partnership we developed to be highly successful at individual, departmental, and institutional levels. At an individual level, we both felt that experience of working in partnership was a very positive one. We worked together successfully to develop the curriculum mapping tools, design and implement the survey, carry out the interviews, and disseminate the results (see Simpson and Clark, 2017). Each stage of the project was characterised by an open dialogue that served as the key vehicle through which the aims were achieved. Clarissa found that the partnership enabled her to pursue lines of enquiry that she did not typically have access to, and her involvement provided a platform for her to speak critically about her academic experiences. Similarly, the project allowed Tom to develop the relationships he thought necessary to enhance the curriculum with respect to information and digital literacy. Our partnership also allowed us to promote a way of working together that we both believe to important in terms of its substance and practice.

At a programme level, our project has also led to some specific innovations with respect to the digital curriculum. One of the main findings of the project revealed that digital literacy often remains hidden within degree programmes. For instance, a participant in the focus group described how the project made them think about digital skills that they were not aware of previously, but would be "*valuable to their CV*". Whilst the mapping exercise clearly revealed that such a curriculum did exist, and students did develop their skills, our evidence also highlighted that aspects of digital literacy were often poorly articulated by staff. A central recommendation was, therefore, to narrate elements of digital literacy that existed within modules in the context of the wider programme so that students could better connect their knowledge and skills. This has subsequently been taken forward through the implementation of a zero credit module that has been designed, in part, to introduce students to information and digital literacy. Further innovations will also include 'badging' modules with respect to the elements of digital literacy that they contain so students can recognise their digital abilities and competencies as and when they develop. This will help to students navigate their degree, and the capabilities they are developing as a part of it. However, it is also worth underlining that Tom's specific influence within the Department - and his experience of programme design - clearly influenced the decision to accept the findings of the research and implement these changes.

Our project has also made an impact at an institutional level and has fed directly into wider University strategies concerned with technology-enhanced learning. One key actor within the University who has a responsibility for information and digital literacy commented, *'it looks like a brilliant project - and the findings are difficult to ignore'*. Not only has our project led to the development of shared resource to 'map' digital curricula within programmes, the questionnaire that sought to measure digital capacity has also produced a student-informed method of assessing 'learning gain' with respect to digital curricula. To this end, the dissemination strategy also fed directly into a working group that designed the institutional framework for information and digital literacy that was approved by the University in November 2017. Led by a key provider of academic support services, the framework has been explicitly designed to support students' employability and career aspirations across the institution.

More broadly, as a visible example of the wider 'Inside Knowledge' scheme, the project has made a contribution to the partnership learning community within the institution. Whilst small in number, student engagement projects have had some limited visibility within the institution for a number of years. However, this work has tended to take the form of institution-led group projects rather than department focussed partnership working. Delivering the project aims has demonstrated that these types of partnership are possible and that they can enhance the student experience at local levels. Indeed, Clarissa also found some evidence to suggest the partnership inspired some of her friends to want to work more collaboratively with staff, helping to disrupt the notion of distinct communities of 'teachers' and 'learners'.

Reflections on the project

However, we make these claims of effectiveness with more reservation in respect to changing the institutional culture of the University itself. Whilst the model of partnership that we developed clearly was successful in many ways, it was also constrained in others. There were two main challenges in this respect. The first concerns the limitations of the project specifically, and the second, the nature of partnership working within the institution more generally.

In the first instance, it is worth underlining that without institutional support in terms of staff 'buy-out' and formal payment for Clarissa's work, the project would simply not have been viable. In a 'research-led' institution, there would have been little formal departmental support for the project should it not have received funding. Whilst our commitment to partnership working was high, it was only realised through an initiative that was created by those forward-thinking individuals in the University who devised the scheme.

Even then, only three projects were supported in the first year of the initiative and a competitive tendering process was designed to select projects judged most likely to fulfil the aims of the 'Inside Knowledge Scholarship'. This had a number of effects. Firstly, it meant that developing a proposal was a precarious one – and one that constrained a more 'ground up' approach to partnership. Not only did the limited nature of the funding mean that Clarissa was paid at a much lower rate than might ordinarily be expected for the level of 'Researcher', at a departmental level there was also no formal mechanism to support students to engage in the process before the stages of proposal. This necessarily limited the influence that Clarissa could have in

the initial development of the project. Given the formal nature of the application process, the initial thrust of the partnership had to come from the direction of staff. This meant that Clarissa always felt as though the project was led by Tom, with her acting as a paid research assistant.

However, with little institutional culture around the issue of student partnership, the ability for any student to contribute from the 'ground up' was always likely to be limited. Student participation is still an emerging phenomenon within the context of the UK Higher Education sector and it was something that was completely new to Clarissa as an undergraduate student. So whilst the project allowed her to develop her experience of partnership working, the lack of other opportunities within the context of her programme and the wider institution meant that both she and her student cohort were not adequately prepared to consider how partnerships could 'work' within the context of their degree experience. This was also the case moving forward. As previously mentioned, although Clarissa found evidence to suggest that her peers were very interested in working in partnership, there were few opportunities to engage with such work elsewhere. The highly competitive nature of what partnership work was available meant that her peers generally perceived it to be for only the most academically able and, given these opportunities mostly operated at an institutional level, they were not the type of partnerships they were interested in developing anyway.

Furthermore, not only did the formal application process for the project mean that Clarissa lost out on the experience of seeking funding for a project - which would have personal benefit in terms of applying for MA and PhD courses - her entire involvement was predicated on her successful application for the single post of 'Inside Knowledge Scholar'. Whilst she was successful on this occasion, and in spite of our subsequent efforts to communicate with as much as the cohort as possible, the process of application inevitably excluded other voices – not all applicants could be offered the job. Moreover, whilst the focus groups enabled a rich discussion of digital literacy with some of Clarissa's peers at year one and year two, her identity as a 'year two student concerned with curriculum development' meant that (soon to depart) year three students did not engage with the project as well as other cohorts. This meant that deeper discussion on issues around digital competencies could not be explored to the extent to which we might have anticipated. So, although Clarissa's position as a student enabled a more collaborative way of approaching the curriculum than Tom might have otherwise had access to, it is also important to recognise the heterogeneity of the student cohort and the necessarily partial nature of the partnership.

Finally, the funding only allowed Clarissa to work for a total of 45 hours - and the University budget did allow for any of that money to 'carry over' beyond the semester that the project was scheduled to run. Evidently, any further attempt to enact change beyond this relatively short-time frame would come at some cost to her other academic interests and could not simply be expected. As a more permanent fixture of the organisation who had control over the levers of learning and teaching more generally, Tom necessarily had a driving responsibility for the management of the project and any change that might emerge from it.

To these ends, effectiveness is always value-driven and perspective-laden (Covello, 2010). Therefore, any judgement of 'success' needs to be made with respect to the administrative structures and requirements of the institution, the personal and institutional drivers of the partnership, and the emergent relationships that are negotiated between students and staff. So, whilst we would argue that the project was very successful in terms of its aims, relationships, and outcomes, we believe that more innovative work within the Department and the wider institution is likely to be constrained by those structures that currently shape both the nature and visibility of partnership working.

Follow up and future plans
To this end, the project is a smaller part of what is likely to be a longer process of establishing meaningful partnership working within Sociological Studies and the University. This includes both raising awareness of what partnership working might mean, how it might be done, and how both students can engage in meaningful ways. Having achieved some initial momentum, one potential idea is to try and establish a 'partnership working group' to develop both policy and practice within the Department, and monitor any mechanisms that are subsequently developed. This would involve looking at how spaces for partnership working can be implemented, and how it can be better facilitated with respect to the undergraduate curriculum.

Of course, without further institutional support, any developments in both these areas are predicated on the personal commitment of Tom and Clarissa specifically, and the continuing engagement of Sociological Studies staff and students more generally. Whilst curriculum-based partnerships would be one way of creating a vehicle through which both visibility and sustainability could be achieved at a local level, there is little reason to imagine that such an integrated way of working is likely to be possible in the near future. With no institutional requirement to develop such partnerships, the relative costs of establishing and maintaining these spaces, and the uncertain nature of current funding, there is unlikely to be much movement in the short to medium term. Although both authors continue to be very committed to the project, and enthusiastic with respect to encouraging positive change within the Department and throughout the University, any personal commitment to partnership work is always constrained and enabled by the institution itself.

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